

Testimony of
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United Methodist Committee on Relief
Emergency Services Office

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In the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina, UMCOR sent staff and consultants to Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Our purpose was to connect the national response agency to the local United Methodist response as well as federal and state responses. Contacts were made with local disaster response coordinators, judicatory leaders, FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaisons, and local response agencies.

Daily calls hosted by National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) enabled UMCOR to know and coordinate ongoing activities with those of other response agencies. Separate calls hosted by Church World Service (CWS) enabled the faith-based organizations to coordinate their response. These calls were particularly helpful in the distribution of material resources.

Within a few days, UMCOR placed persons in the FEMA Joint Field Offices (JFO) in MS and LA. These persons were engaged in the ongoing meetings and dialogue between federal, state and local response organizations/agencies.

In the MS JFO, UMCOR was also participating in meetings of the Joint Housing Command, where solutions for the many displaced families were being discussed.

Because of UMCOR's experience in setting up and running refugee camps internationally and providing case management leadership and training in the U.S., we were asked by the FEMA staff in the JFO to write a proposal for work in MS.

It has been evident from the earliest part of the response to Katrina and then Rita that while the FEMA staff on the ground are very well aware of the work of voluntary agencies and the tremendous resources they bring to response, the FEMA staff at the highest levels have no understanding or appreciation of the voluntary sector.

It was at the urging of the long-time FEMA employees that UMCOR changed its proposal from only serving MS to one presented in conjunction with National VOAD for a consortium of case management agencies to be formed to work on a national scale. The lack of understanding at the highest levels was made evident by the repeated number of

conference calls, answering questions, writing papers all to explain over and over what disaster case management is.

The lack of awareness extended to other government agencies. The offices of faith based and community initiatives in the Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development and the Veterans Administration began dialogue with the White House's Office of Faith Based Initiatives and developed a plan using refugee resettlement as its frame of reference. When members of the National VOAD tried to make these two entities aware of the already existing faith-based disaster programs, there was little to no willingness to even invite those disaster organizations to be in the conversation. I personally could not get an invitation to attend the meetings even after pointedly asking to attend.

After UMCOR/National VOAD had been awarded a \$66 million grant to provide long-term disaster case management for individuals and families affected by Hurricane Katrina, the leadership of FEMA continued to miscommunicate the intended result of the grant by sending notices that the grant would solve the Katrina hotel housing crises that FEMA was facing.

I was in the FEMA offices in Washington, DC dozens of times in the weeks and months following Hurricane Katrina. Several times I either tried or made appointments to see FEMA Recovery Director David Garratt and FEMA Director David Paulison in order to discuss UMCOR's long term recovery case management plans specifically and the involvement of voluntary agencies generally. Each time I would either be shuffled off to someone else or brushed off due to "lack of time"

Finally after meeting with FEMA staff in the Recovery Division a meeting with Garratt and Paulison was scheduled for Feb. 9, 2006. When the National VOAD leadership arrived for the meeting, Dave Garratt met us with the apology that another meeting had come up and he would not be able to participate in our meeting. As we met with Paulison, he made clear his lack of knowledge of the voluntary agencies by repeatedly telling the group that they needed to "step up to the plate."

The lack of consideration by Garratt to attend and the utter lack of preparation or care by Paulison in the meeting with National VOAD leadership gives a clear indication of the disconnect between the leadership at FEMA and the people, and organizations on the ground that provide relief in disasters.

An article published on Feb. 27, 2006 by The Washington Post reports that the voluntary sector has raised over \$3.27 billion. Of that, over \$2 billion has already been disbursed. It is clear that the voluntary sector has "stepped up to the plate."

Observations on what can be done to better coordinate relief and reconstruction efforts:

- Faith based and voluntary organizations have expended a great deal of effort to build relationships with each other before disasters occur. Federal and state

- officials could learn from the voluntary sector that in the midst of a disaster is not the time to build relationships.
- Better relationships between top levels at FEMA and FEMA on the ground would keep help voluntary agencies from bearing the brunt of this disconnect. A “firewall” between the political appointees and the government employees who are charged with implementing the policies and programs would help keep continuity in disaster response rather than have response policies constantly fall prey to new political trends.
 - There must be some understanding with regard to disaster response between government agencies. So often two separate agencies will be attempting to solve the same problem while being isolated from each other.

Preparation for 2006 Hurricane Season:

- Meeting with judicatories affected by the 2005 hurricanes to evaluate lessons learned.
- Ongoing training with coastal judicatories to prepare for disasters. (For example, we have training scheduled on April 24-26 for our Southeastern States.)
- Restocking material resources.
- Meeting with Volunteers in Mission leadership to refine deployment strategies for individual volunteers as well as response teams.
- As a form of mitigation, United Methodist case managers working with Katrina/Rita clients are addressing concerns related to the upcoming 2006 season on a case-by-case basis.